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ABSTRACT

The way in which professional counselors perceive or conceptualize clients and their presenting issues constitutes an outward expression of the counselors' philosophy, training and world view. These perceptions and conceptualizations directly or indirectly affect assessment, therapeutic methodology, and even client outcomes. This article presents a discussion of a professional orientation based on client strengths. This orientation, borrowed mostly from social work, has been suggested under related ideas by counseling theorists at various times in the past. The purpose of this article is to summarize the strengths perspective, to describe its philosophic underpinnings, and to illustrate its compatibility with counseling values. The strengths approach may serve to enhance the professional counselors' opportunity to serve clients from the perspective of a human growth and development model. Contains 40 references. (BF)

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TOWARD A STRENGTHS PERSPECTIVE IN COUNSELING

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Abstract

This article describes the theoretical foundation of a strengths perspective for professional counseling. Adapting practice concepts from social work theory, the article presents an overview of the strengths approach to the counseling process and illustrates ways in which the strengths perspective may be applied to a variety of counseling situations.

Toward A Strengths Perspective in Counseling

The way in which professional counselors perceive or conceptualize clients and their presenting issues constitutes an outward expression of the counselors' philosophy, training, and world view. These perceptions and conceptualizations directly or indirectly affect assessment, therapeutic methodology, and even client outcomes. This article presents a discussion of a professional orientation based on client strengths. This orientation, borrowed mostly from social work, has been suggested under related ideas by counseling theorists at various times in the past. The purpose of this article is to summarize the strengths perspective, to describe its philosophic underpinnings, and to illustrate its compatibility with counseling values. Professional counselors may find the strengths approach enhances their opportunity to serve clients from the perspective of a human growth and development model.

Essentially, a strength perspective in counseling is built upon the idea that counseling interventions and planned outcomes should be based upon recognition

and utilization of clients strengths rather than client weaknesses. To that end, the strengths perspective is linked to several existing theories of helping in counseling literature. Among these the most important is the growing ideology of client empowerment, an idea that is itself based on therapeutic development of client strengths.

Weick (1992) described the strengths perspective as a form of knowledge that is decidedly opposed to empiricism as a basis for practice and theory. Instead, recognizing the inherent knowledge in lived experience establishes the client as the "expert" on his or her own life. The goal of effective practice becomes one of recognizing the strengths arising from this knowledge in such a way that the client discovers and brings to bear his or her obvious and latent strengths.

Social Work Origins

The strengths perspective in social work emerged mostly during the 1980's based on the work of several theorists, although the history of social work reflects earlier smatterings of the idea. During the 1980's,

Weick (1983) argued that a holistic perspective would help the field of social work separate itself from the remnants of the medical model, an idea that served as a basis for later articulation of the strengths perspective. Similarly Rapp, Gowdy, Sullivan, and Wintersteen (1988), and Modrcin, Rapp, and Chamberlain (1985), developed a case management approach in mental health based on the strengths perspective. The scope of the strengths perspective for social work practice was finally articulated in 1989 (Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, & Kisthardt). The most comprehensive work to date on the strengths perspective in social work appeared in 1992 (Saleebey).

Most social work theorists have followed the basic tenets set down by Weick, Rapp, Sullivan, and Kisthardt (1989) in their description of the strengths approach. They conceptualized the strengths perspective to be based upon an appreciation for client abilities, rather than upon their shortcomings or pathologies. These researchers saw the strengths perspective as an orientation to practice that would encourage social workers to recognize that all people, even clients, can

and do learn creative ways to deal with the complexities of life.

Saleebey (1992) presented a variety of views on application of the strengths perspective for social work practice. Among other things, his work is important because it established a clear philosophical and clinical link between the strengths perspective and client empowerment. Saleebey noted that empowerment is a process of helping clients discover power within themselves, a belief requiring recognition of clients' strengths. Later, Holmes and Saleebey (1993) argued that the flight from the medical model toward an empowerment agenda represents a concern for social justice within human service professions.

Conceptually, the strength perspective as an approach to professional practice is compatible with the long-held value in social work that every individual possesses uniqueness and inherent dignity. (Compton and Galaway, 1984). Philosophically, perhaps, the strengths perspective can be considered a counter-measure against medicalization of deviance that has occurred so often in the helping professions (see

Fairclough, 1989; Krause, 1977; Kurtz and Chalfant, 1984; & Thompson, 1990). The old medical model in human services fostered a form of professional practice characterized by a continual search for client pathologies, without authentic regard for their strengths. Such practice was an expression of the belief that clients were deviants in the sociological sense. The expertise of "scientists" supported ideas of deviancy (Hills, 1980). But in the social arena, those labeled as deviants often developed coping methods that tended to reinforce the very labels they have been given by others (see Orcutt, 1983). Holmes and Saleebey (1993) argued that for such reasons, the granting of clienthood status represents a political act that isolates the client from his or her natural community.

Social workers who now use the strengths perspective as their basic orientation to professional practice are helping forge a renewal of practice values that seeks to maximize client participation in the helping process. Full participation connotes professional-client relationships that are based upon

mutual goals instead of upon a power imbalance in favor of the professional.

Similar Concepts in Counseling

Professional counselors, whose work is qualitatively different from that of social workers, can still lay claim to many ideas in their discipline's literature that are philosophically similar to the strengths perspective. Globally speaking, the very core of the counseling profession revolves around a belief in human growth and development, an idea that is synonymous with strengths recognition. The heavy Rogerian (Rogers, 1951) influence in counseling is based upon the implicit notion that clients who are afforded the protection of a proper therapeutic environment can discover within themselves solutions to life's problems. Similarly, many of the methods of Gestalt therapy (Perls, 1969) presuppose that human beings, because they are human, have the capacity or strength to learn new ways of seeing old problems.

The techniques of client encouragement in the Adlerian approach to counseling is built on the counselor's attitude that projects to the client an

assurance of his or her worth and ability (Nikelly & Dinkmeyer, 1971). Counseling approaches centering upon improving communication skills (Satir, 1983) or changing life-long habits of cognition (McCullin, (1986) are formulated on the assumption that clients have the capacities, strengths, and abilities to change and grow primarily through mental effort and intentional behavioral shifts.

In addition, existential approaches to counseling encompass an implicit belief in the human capacity to learn from authentic experience (see Meek, 1985; Mahrer, 1978; Nystul, 1993). The existential theme of finding personal meaning is dependent upon the client possessing the skills and desires, both of which are strengths, to face the human condition. Existentialism has been viewed as a reaction to scientific psychology that suppressed subjective experience and individuality (Murphy and Kovach, 1972). That suppression, of course, meant that client strengths were not a focal point of counseling and psychotherapy. In a similar vein, Wright and Fletcher (1982) argued that clients are too often viewed negatively, so that their

strengths and abilities may seldom be noticed.

Many theories of counselor skill development encompass explicit or implicit ideals about the counselor's responsibility to acknowledge client strengths. Pietrofesa, Leonard, and Van Hoose (1978) noted the importance of the counselor's acceptance of the client as a building block for rapport. Acceptance is contingent upon recognizing the client as a fellow human being with strengths as well as weaknesses. The client does not seek out the counselor's help with the expectation of judgmental responses.

Part of the definition of an effective professional helper hinges upon the ideal that clients will not be made to feel ashamed and will not be criticized (Patterson & Eisenberg, 1983) during the counseling process. The implication is that clients are to be granted the respect and dignity of any human being, without being subjected to counselor behaviors that would undermine self-concept or erode self-esteem. The medical model of practice that the strengths perspective seeks to replace may easily reduce the client's self-esteem because it encourages counselors

or other practitioners to see the client only as a collection of symptoms or pathologies. In such a practice setting, the client might have great difficulty discovering or utilizing his or her own strengths and abilities. In essence, the medical model of practice has not been compatible with counseling values because at the level of social encounter it encourages the professional to denigrate the client. Often, clients experiencing the medical model recognize the social cues of their demeaned status and behave as if the professional-client relationship is adversarial in nature. Under such circumstances, therapeutic progress is usually minimal.

Scissons (1993) noted the importance for counselors to encourage self-development in their clients. Although the idea seems both simple and obvious, its implications are directly related to an appreciation of client abilities and strengths. Scissons' idea requires that counselors recognize and build upon the client's current abilities to learn new skills that can enhance strengths of the future.

It is important to note here that counseling and

all other forms of professional helping cannot and do not depend upon the weaknesses or shortcomings of the client as the basis for clinical or personal growth. Instead, it is precisely the client's strengths that are acknowledged and called into play when goals are set and interventions planned. Simply stated, counseling progress cannot be achieved or goals reached by emphasizing client weaknesses.

Cavanagh (1982) described the importance of the client's knowledge of the self, including knowledge of strengths, weaknesses, needs, feelings, and motives. Exploring and discovering knowledge of the self is, in it own right, a meta-strength that allows the client to "take stock" of his or her situation, to identify personal and counseling goals, and to formulate plans for future growth. The counselor's role in this process is to facilitate the exploration of the self by offering the client the psychological safety of a counseling environment in which the client's strengths are respected and encouraged.

The process, as it relates to counselor-client rapport, is supportive, encouraging, and growth-

oriented. The professional counselor demonstrates faith in the client's inherent or learned strengths in such a way that they lead to additional learning and growing. Within the practical immediacy of the counseling encounter, the counselor who relies upon a medical model approach to counseling will, no doubt, convey to the client the message that he or she is in a devalued role and without useful strengths. Simply stated, clients are not stupid. They can and do recognize various social cues from the counselor regarding their status, the counselor's feelings toward them, and whether or not they are being accepted as "real" people with strengths and knowledge of the world in which they live.

Along these lines, Corsini (Corsini & Wedding, 1989) told the poignant story of how he had "accidently" achieved therapeutic success by telling a prison inmate that he was intelligent. Although Corsini had not meant the comment as therapy, the prisoner took the statement as acknowledgment of his worth and potential, and changed his life accordingly. This story speaks to the very heart of the matter ---

in recognizing the client's strengths over his weaknesses, Corsini helped, even inadvertently, the client grow and change in new ways. In essence, the client made maximum use of that one "therapeutic" message by understanding that Corsini had identified and appreciated the client's worth as a person with strengths. In the parlance of empowerment, the inmate did, in fact, discover power within himself.

Implications for Practice

One of the most useful concepts in counseling literature that is related to a strengths perspective is contextualism. The concept emphasizes that clients are best understood from the perspective of the context of the lives they actually live. With philosophic connections to humanistic approaches to counseling in which the personal world of the client is paramount, contextualism shifts therapeutic assessment from inside the client to the social context of life. In other words, the only way to understand fully the client's situation is to view it against the backdrop of the life context.

The idea of contextualism is related to concepts

from disciplines other than counseling. Schutz (1967) advanced the phenomenological idea that social science is in the business of objectifying subjective meanings. Symbolic interactionsists (see for example, Becker & McCall, 1990) have long argued that human meaning arises mainly from social negotiation and sharing, and not from objective reality. These ideas are important to contextualism because they illustrate that any understanding that occurs solely from the perspective of the professional's pre-existing theories will necessarily lack an authentic appreciation for the context from which the "facts" emerge.

Contextualism offers a philosophy by which counselors can work to understand the client's feelings, thoughts, and behaviors as context-specific. In other words, what might be symptoms of pathology in the medical model of counseling become appropriate responses to life situations for the contextualist. This is not to disavow the existence of all mental illness by suggesting that anything and everything makes sense in its natural context. Instead, it means that ways of being and coping are best understood by

examining the contexts that produced them. The client's "private world" takes on new meaning here because true understanding replaces the search for pathology.

Contextualism is thus compatible with a strengths perspective in several distinct ways. In the first place, when client affect, thinking, and behaviors are understood in context, the counselor is in a much better position to recognize the client's strengths, capacities, and even aspirations. The counseling process itself is modified by the counselor's orientation toward strengths because he or she seeks to identify and build upon these strengths early in the process.

Additionally, when the client is viewed as a human being possessing skills for living in the everyday world, the counselor begins the counseling process with a respectful disposition toward the client. As Corey and Corey (1989) noted, a counselor shows respect for the client by expressing a belief that the client is able to exercise control over his or her own life. Thus, the counselor acts toward the client in a way

that conveys that the counselor recognizes the client's capacities and strengths for living and solving some of life's problems.

Any professional counselor will recognize that a strengths perspective is, by necessity, substantially different from traditional perspectives. Historically, both social work and psychology have been more closely linked to the medical model than has counseling. As a younger human service, counseling does not have to "overcome" a history of embracing medical, psychiatric, or paternalistic models of pathology that other disciplines were once eager to embrace. For the most part, the influence of medical models on counseling has been coincidental and, perhaps, even accidental. At its core, counseling has generally advocated human development and education models of helping. Client problems have traditionally been viewed as problems of everyday living, so that diagnostic labeling was not a primary enterprise.

A strengths perceptive in counseling may revitalize these models by giving professional practitioners a theoretical basis for practice that is

proactive, humane, and productive. The concept of empowerment in counseling involves the counselor and client working together toward common cause and goals in a way that is emancipating (Holmes, 1993). When emphasis in counseling is placed on recognizing and enhancing strengths that clients already possess, clients may develop an increased appreciation for their own abilities. In this way, the counseling process may center upon helping clients understand how they might apply pre-existing strengths and capacities to solve the problems at-hand.

Suggested Applications

Although the strengths perspective is applicable to all therapeutic efforts, it is particularly appropriate for assessment, problem-definition, planned interventions, and goal-setting. Assessment from the strengths perspective begins with the counselor's "mind set" or general orientation toward clients. Client strengths can only be important in that type of counseling that begins with a willingness and interest on the counselor's part to see all clients as possessing some strengths. This basic orientation or

attitude by the counselor encourages the client to contemplate and consider his or her strengths within the context of the presenting issue.

This form of assessment does not require the counselor to ignore or to minimize the client's human shortcomings. The counselor notes client failures, but recognizes that therapeutic growth must come from strengths. So assessment here means that the client's life situation, presenting problems, coping skills, and natural support systems are viewed as a holistic mosaic. Putting aside weaknesses and past failures allows the counselor to search for hidden strengths instead of for hidden pathologies. Assessment and other counseling activities thus become a positive, uplifting process in which client limitations are accepted at face value, but are not taken as destiny for the future. Even during the assessment process, the client understands that it is strength and not weakness that is being assessed.

Assessment becomes part of helping in the literal sense. Taking special interest in the client's strengths conveys an immediate message to the client

that his or her "life story" is not being trivialized, rearranged, or translated into pathology or failure. The counselor interprets the client's disclosures and concerns by assessing their potential for amelioration by existing capacities. In this way, the client is encouraged to see himself or herself as the proper instrument of change.

One of the functions of assessment in counseling is to help the counselor better understand the client (Nystul, 1993). When the counseling encounter is viewed as a form of social interaction, it is important to recognize that the assessment phase of counseling can have therapeutic or even negative effects on outcomes. Clients react differently to assessments that are searches for pathology than they do to assessments that seem constructive, encouraging, supportive, and optimistic. For this reason, assessment in a strengths perspective approach to counseling focuses on the relationship among strengths and skills, client-identified goals, and the quality of community support available to the client.

Problem-definition, an important step in the

counseling process, seeks to establish a consensus between counselor and client as to the nature of the presenting issue. A subtle issue in problem-definition relates to moral issues. Years ago, London (1964) described some of the issues that arise in therapy because the counselor and the client may share different moral values. Many such issues emerge from problem-definition efforts. But again, the strengths perspective may help the counselor understand that differences in moral values may have coping and survival benefits given the context of the client's life. This is not meant to suggest that all moral values are equal, but only that possessing a moral value of most any sort can be viewed as a strength, even if the value happens to differ from the counselor's.

The expressed willingness of the client and the counselor to reach consensual agreement about the nature of problems encourages social and personal bonding that enhances rapport. When coupled with client assessment, the counselor's main task in problem-definition is to help the client frame

presenting issues or problems in such a way that they are most compatible with the client's strengths and world view. In a real sense, giving voice to the nature of a problem may become a strength for the client in its own right. Verbalizing and agreeing on the nature of a problem may be the first step in marshalling one's own strengths to deal with it in a constructive way. The point is that under the supportive environment of the strengths perspective, the act of "naming" the problem may carry considerable therapeutic value.

Setting goals and planning counseling interventions are inseparable activities. One assumption of the strengths perspective is that the client is capable of recognizing and setting his or her own goals for counseling. The role of the counselor here is to facilitate the process and to plan the counseling effort in such a way that the client's goals are honored and that his or her strengths are called forth. As Yost and Corbishley (1987) noted, the counselor may help the client identify goals by giving him or her sufficient information about the counseling

process to allow the client to make an informed decision about continuing. If clients are knowledgeable about the counseling process itself, they may be encouraged to discuss openly their concerns, goals, and capacities.

Planning goals and counseling interventions that are compatible with the strengths perspective may include the following:

* Goals must come from the client once he or she understands the nature of the counseling process.
* Goals must be discussed in the language of the client so that they will be most compatible with the client's existing or potential strengths.
* Counseling approaches and techniques must be expressed in terms that have resonance for the client so that the connection with personal strengths can be apprehended.
* Plans must be made and expressed in such a way that the counselor's faith in the client's strengths are conveyed openly.

For obvious reasons, language plays an important role in the strengths perspective. Professional jargon may have political ramifications in that it can convey the idea that the counselor is in a position of power relative to the client (Holmes & Saleebey, 1993). So clinical-sounding jargon is contraindicated in the strengths perspective approach to counseling.

Specific applications of the strengths perspective in counseling will have to be based on an appraisal of existing local conditions, type of clients being served, and type of counseling being done. But in all settings, the strengths perspective remains a psychological attitude on the counselor's part. From this attitude comes a view of clients as human beings with potential to grow in new ways. Also from this attitude comes the counselor's willingness to engage the client as an equal, without resorting to power-imbalanced therapy.

Women's issues in counseling seem especially suitable for the strengths perspetive. For example, when women become the victims of power conflicts, the goal of counseling may center upon helping them find

ways to empower themselves for sustained solutions (O'Neil & Egan, 1993). However, there is also the risk that the counseling process will force a woman into a dependency role with an authority figure --- the counselor (Lips, 1993).

Yet such risks are minimized when counseling centers upon helping the individual client discover her own unique strengths that are beyond the sociopolitical influences of gender socialization. To the degree that the strengths perspective intentionally fosters empowerment, clients should find the counseling process more liberating than oppressive.

Similar possibilities exist for application of the strengths perspective in multicultural counseling. As Toupin (1981) noted in explaining therapeutic work with groups that are culturally unique, "...a successful therapist is one who has the capacity to start where the client is (p. 304)." The strengths perspective allows the counselor and the client to start with the client as a human being. Each client, regardless of background, brings to the encounter a variety of life experiences that are viewed as strengths with

applications in the present as well as in the futrue.

In the past, people with diverse cultural backgrounds may have concluded that counseling is a tool by which the dominant culture seeks to control their lives (Lee & Richardson, 1991). The strengths perspective has the potential to alter this perception because it does not perpetuate power imbalances through the identification of client failures. The person who has a different cultural background should find the strengths perspective counselor concerned with seeing diversity in values, beliefs, and behaviors as strengths in their own right.

Synthesis for the Future

Counseling as a profession is in an ideal position to embrace a strengths perspective as a guiding philosophy. Notwithstanding its current origins in social work, the strengths perspective has much to offer clients and human service professionals from a variety of disciplines. Counseling has not traditionally been a human service that sought to mimic medicine or psychiatry. Left to its own devices, counseling has emerged as the human service least

concerned with pathology detection. The profession has consistently expressed its belief in education and development as the proper route for helping change lives for the better.

With such a history, counseling may move more quickly in the future toward a strengths perspective. How it adapts the perspective to the counseling process will be quite different from the way social work attempts the same transformation. In making its own, unique contribution to the helping professions, counseling may emerge as a therapeutic community in which the client is viewed as a full partner throughout the counseling process. Such a professional environment would allow the counselor to express his or her own strengths on the client's behalf.

Conclusion

This brief discussion of the strengths perspective in counseling sought to explain its origins, its principles, and its typical applications. Certainly more research and field applications are warranted to help establish the efficacy of what amounts to a shift in paradigms for professional counselors. Yet on the

face of it, it would seem that the strengths perspective is highly compatible with the core values of the counseling profession.

In the way of a caveat, it should be noted that the strengths perspective does not involve a "tally sheet" on which the client's strengths are weighed against failures, weaknesses, or shortcomings. As a general orientation to clients and counseling, the strengths perspective seeks to recognize those capacities within the client that are most useful in the life-long process of growth, development, and understanding. Toward that end, counselors first come together with clients as human beings. Given an emphasis on human strengths, both the client and the counselor should fare better. First strengths, then empowerment, then social justice --- worthy goals for the professional counselor.

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